Northern Dutch Farmer elites from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century

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Published in:
Paper presented at the conference “Bürgerlich-bäuerliche elite 17.-19. Jahrhundert / / Rural Elites in Europe – A Comparative Perspective”

In the shadow of the nobility: Local farmer elites in the northern Netherlands from the 17th to the 19th century*

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Introduction

Dutch historiography on early modern elites is mainly concerned with powerful urban patricians, while nearly all publications on the rural elite deal with nobility only. Nonetheless, recent research for the province of Zeeland shows the important role of non-noble middlemen in the countryside (Brusse/Mijnhardt 2011) and reveals the existence of a wealthy farmer elite (Van Cruyningen 2000). A large part of the impressive economic, cultural and intellectual achievements of the Dutch Republic from the 16th century onwards is usually attributed to urban merchants mainly living in the coastal provinces. However, more than half the Dutch population lived in the countryside.

The Dutch Golden Age was followed by a period in which the international economic position of the Dutch Republic declined. Within the Dutch Republic the countryside regained importance compared to urban areas. The percentage of the population living outside chartered towns increased from 54% around 1700 to 63% in 1850 (estimate of the authors). The limited size of the rural nobility created space for non-noble inhabitants to build their own sphere of influence. Wealthy farmer families formed the majority of the top group (elite) in villages in economic, cultural as well as political respect, notwithstanding that their supra-local influence was rather limited.

This article deals with the long term development of this local farmer elite in two contrasting societies from the 17th to the 19th century. In general –ignoring the proto-industrial regions – up to the 20th century two diverging agricultural systems existed side by side in the Netherlands (Karel et al 2012). The Eastern Marne in the province of Groningen formed part of the very market-oriented Dutch coastal region with its large socio-economic differences. In its six parishes (Kloosterburen, Leens, Warfhuizen, Wehe, Wierhuizen and Zuurdijk), in 1806, about 2,500 inhabitants lived in 519 houses, including approximately 125 farmsteads. The parish of Oosterhesselen in the province of Drenthe, on the other hand, was situated in the less market-oriented inland of the Netherlands. Its three villages (Oosterhesselen, Gees and Zwinderen) and a noble manor (Klencke) contained around 1810

* We thank Geurt Collenteur and Gert Schansker for their assistance in writing this article.

approximately 102 houses (including 94 farms) with 591 inhabitants. The population in the Eastern Marne declined from 1650 to 1750, but afterwards increased again (Paping 1995), while the population of Oosterhesselen slowly increased over the whole period (Verduin 1982). Both societies experienced an acceleration of their population-growth rate after 1800 to about 1% annually.

To evaluate the question if major changes occurred in the group of farmers constituting the local rural elite in the northern Dutch provinces in the period 1650-1850, we will compare three aspects of these elites for both agricultural systems. First, we will explore which groups belonged to the local economic top class over time. Using tax data we selected the 20 richest households in several years between 1650 and 1850. Secondly, we will zoom in on those inhabitants occupying official and political positions locally and provincially. Finally, we will determine the continuity over the generations of the farmer families contributing to the local elite.

The economic position of the local farmer elite: coastal Eastern Marne

From the 17th century onwards, the very prosperous Dutch coastal region was characterized by a commercial, market-oriented agriculture with relatively large farms and numerous landless labourers. Even in the countryside specialisation was high and many people worked outside agriculture (in the Groningen clay region about 40%: Paping 1995). This was made possible by a well-developed money economy and institutional system. Urbanisation-levels in the Netherlands were extremely high, especially in Holland (over 50%), but in the two northern provinces Friesland and Groningen only 20-25% of the population lived in towns. Still, agricultural production of food and other raw materials remained crucial for the economy. As a consequence, the secure control of land was of prime importance for individual socio-economic positions in the countryside.

Freehold farming was in most parts of the coastal region relatively rare. It has to be noted that in Groningen, the property rights of tenants were stronger than elsewhere in the Netherlands. Already in the 16th century a system existed in which the tenants usually owned the farm buildings and part of the land belonged specifically to this farm (*beklemming*). Owners were allowed to raise the rent every six years. However, if the farmer did not agree with this increase, the owner was obliged to purchase the farm buildings for an estimated price.

Land owners in the 16th century Groningen clay region were monasteries (15-20%; confiscated by the province in 1594), local institutions (10-20%), the nobility (10-20%),

urban patricians from the city of Groningen (5-10%) and several rural non-nobles and freeholders. The absolute number of farmsteads remained quite stable from 1600 until the middle of the 19th century; consequently the percentage of farmers fell from more than one third of the households to less than a fifth (Paping 1995). Subsistence farming was rare, and most of the other agricultural households consisted of landless labourers.

We studied who were most heavily taxed in the six parishes in the Eastern Marne according to the taxation lists of 1672, 1691, 1731, 1809/10 and 1836/1837 (Groninger Archieven, SA nr. 2175, 2217, 2239; AGB nr. 1118-1119; Gemeentearchief Leens and Kloosterburen). These taxes were officially levied on net wealth, although income and consumption also played a role. From the start the lists were headed by members of the noble families living in three manors: Verhildersum near Leens, Lulema near Warfhuizen and Borgweer near Wehe (Feenstra 1981; Formsma et al 1987). In the 19th century these noble families disappeared from the Eastern Marne. The tax-differences between the noblemen and the rest of the elite diminished considerably during the period studied. In 1691 the richest noblemen were considered to be three to four times richer than the next on the tax list. In 1809 they only paid twice or one-and-a-half times more, while the last nobleman in 1836 paid only about 10% more than the richest farmer, Warendorp Torringa.

Non-nobles paying the highest taxes were mainly large farmers. In 1691, the first non-farmer, a reverend's widow, was found at place sixteen. In later years the non-noble economic elite was also mostly made up of farmers, supplemented by a few rentiers, merchants and artisans, all usually closely related to farmers families. In 1731 two reverends and the local judge Cleveringa were also positioned high on the list, though lower than the richest farmers. In 1809 the top of the tax-lists was again dominated by farmers. Exceptions were three members of the Cleveringa family, including a former judge, a former urban official and a merchant annex miller. A newly established public notary living at a noble house and a reverend's son came in 1837 just behind the last nobleman and the richest farmer in the municipality of Leens, in a way replacing the Cleveringa's. These two men were followed by a long list of farmers.

The tax-data clearly reveal that the top in the socio-economic structure of the Groningen rural villages was quantitatively dominated by farmers, although in some villages the farmers stood in the shadow of a nobleman. In villages without noblemen, like Kloosterburen and Zuurdijk, farmers formed the top of the local pyramid. There was also a very small intellectual elite consisting of reverends, judges and notaries, which in the tax records was positioned slightly lower than the wealthiest farmers. In any year, only a few

people active in industry and trade reached a position equal to that of the farmers. Most of the employers and self-employed outside agriculture were - together with the medium-sized and smaller farmers - paying low tax-sums. Numerous landless labourers and several poor artisans did not pay anything at all and formed the bottom of the local social structure (Paping 2010). Both groups depended strongly on the large farmers as their most important employers and customers.

By far the richest farmers in 1691 were the heirs of Melle Rengers, living on a large freehold farm in Leens and owning a farm in nearby Vliedorp. The next on the list, Hindrik Cornelis, was a farmer's son owning several pieces of land. The third, the tenant farmer Abel Boelens, bought in 1695 a small noble house elsewhere thus proving that he belonged to a higher social group than most other farmers. His relative Willem Luurts was a tenant farmer on the large Feddemahuis of 73 hectare, who also owned considerable stretches of land. Most of the other wealthy farmers owned pieces of land, but were first and for all rich tenants on large farms. In the first half of the 17th century there were more large freeholds in the Eastern Marne; but, even in this period 'real' freehold farmers were rare.

In the 18th century, the amount of landed property in the hands of rich farmers remained small, while proper freeholders nearly disappeared. Actually, the rich farmers' capital mainly consisted of the value of the farm buildings, cattle and agricultural equipment. As a consequence, even rich farmers depended usually at least partly on land owners. The difference between medium-sized farmers with some freehold land and rich tenants on large farms was diminishing. The most important difference seems to have been that freeholders had a small surplus of capital, taking into account the ownership of several pieces of land.

At the end of the 18th century, tenant-farmers owning some land no longer occupied the highest positions. Not ownership, but the size of the farm became decisive. Previously, the richest inhabitants were large farmers, but not necessarily the largest farmers; the quantity of land they owned was more important. This shift in economic power from land owners to land users was the result of a change in the tenancy-system of *beklemming*. Difficult times in agriculture with decreasing rents had induced landowners to fix the land rents. This trend is confirmed by legal contracts drawn up in the second half of the 18th century, making it nearly impossible to expel farmers from their land. As a consequence, the strong increase in the prices of these 'beklemmingen' from about 1770 to the start of the 19th century made the tenants the factual owners of the land. Especially the tenants of those very large farms arising from 18th century impoldering in Zuurdijk and Kloosterburen turned extremely rich in this period.

The conclusion has to be, that in the 17th century among rich farmers freehold farming and land ownership was a slightly more frequent phenomenon than in the 18th century. Nevertheless, the main source of income of the rural farmer elite was the revenue of their farm. Even most of the richest farmers were depending on land owning noblemen, patricians and institutions, although their position was strengthened by the system of tenancy giving considerable rights to the land users. It was only in the second half of the 18th century that the farmer elite became economically independent from the land owners due to changes in the tenancy contracts stipulating fixed rents and the free disposal of the rented land. As a result the economic power of the farmers increased and differences between the few (partly) freehold farmers and the numerous tenants disappeared.

The economic position of the local farmer elite: inland Oosterhesselen

In many villages in the Dutch inland provinces most families had a farm of their own. Even the few agricultural labourers, though mainly depending on wage-income, lived on small agricultural holdings. Especially in Drenthe, those few specialising in non-agricultural activities, like artisans and shopkeepers, often used land as well and owned a few animals. In the early modern period a surplus agriculture was common, with only a limited amount of the produce being sold, mainly to pay for rents and taxes. Money, though important, was rather scarce. The inland urbanisation-rate was relatively low, though high compared to other western-European countries at that time. In most of the Dutch inland areas, large scale land reclamation (of mainly moor lands) was still possible, while in the coastal region only a limited amount of land could be recovered from the sea. Drenthe stands out in this respect, due to the large stretches of extensively used common land (heath and peat land) and the low population pressure.

In the Dutch inland, freehold farming was much more widespread than in the coastal region. After the Reformation in Drenthe (1603), the land of the catholic monasteries was divided. Only 39% of the cultivated land was used by tenants in 1630 (data for 24 of the 34 parishes). The most important landowners were noblemen (6%) and institutions (7%); the rest of this land was mainly rented out by wealthy farmers. In Drenthe, freeholders outnumbered tenants in the first half of the 17th century with about 63% of the farmers owning their land (Bieleman 1982, p. 153). Differences between villages were large and ranged form 30% to 95% freeholders. Due to rising population, the number of larger farmers declined from the 17th to the 19th century, while the number of smallholders increased considerably.

In 1630, there were 18 freeholders on 58 farmers in total in Oosterhesselen indicating

that the number of freeholders was declining relative to the 16th century (Drents Archief [DrA], OSA nr. 845; Bieleman 1982, p. 254: counts 23 freeholders on 55 farmers). Tenants could also have an influential economic position. For example in 1654, Jan Geerds, tenant of a former monastery, Geert Bantinge, tenant of a nobleman, and Jurjen Sobringe, tenant of the non-noble family Husinge all owned a full right (*waardeel*) in the administration, the use of commons and other mutual interests of the village. Only the freehold farmers Nijeisinge en Oldenbanninge also controlled full rights, while other freeholders owned smaller shares.

In 1654, the group owning more than 25 *mud* of arable land (=6.7 hectare) comprised 32% of the farmers, owning 63% of the land. The largest farms were those of the brothers Jan en Jacob Nijeisinge in Oosterhesselen and the brothers Johan and Harmen Evers in Gees. Compared to the Eastern Marne farm holdings were small, even if we take into account the vast tracks of common land. Also, the arable land in Drenthe was much more fragmented. As a consequence of inheritances, selling and splitting up, every villager owned numerous small pieces in the parts of the parish suitable for arable farming. The fragile balance between the number of animals producing manure and the amount of arable land gave little leeway for the clearance of common waste lands.

In 1654, Roelof Nijenhuis and Tijmen Oldenhuis, both farmers in Zwinderen, were the wealthiest non-nobles in the parish Oosterhesselen, although they did not live on the largest farms. Both men were scions from a rich family and were related to other wealthy families in the province. As a consequence, they can be considered to have belonged to a kind of provincial non-noble elite. There were no real tenants among the richest farmers in 1654. Land and farms were not necessarily in the hands of individual farmers, but could also be administered as a shared heritage. Some families like the Oldenbannings and Lantings owned several farms. Family members were assigned a farm after marriage, and cannot be seen as proper tenants being participants in the joint heritage.

Unfortunately, exact data about the ratio between tenants and owners are unknown for most of the 17th and 18th century, as the lists for the *hearth tax* do not distinguish tenants from freeholders (DrA, OSA nr. 868-869). This absence of differentiation in the tax-lists suggests that economic differences between both groups were relatively small. A proper structural tax on wealth was missing in Drenthe, making it difficult to establish who the richest villagers were. Nevertheless it seems that, apart from the noble family on the Klencke and the two (later one) wealthy families in Zwinderen belonging to a provincial network, the richest farmers were freeholders with large or middle-sized farms during the whole of the 17th and 18th century.

If we consider the twenty wealthiest people at any moment, the local farmer elite changed somewhat during this period. Several farmer families disappeared (Evers, Schuyringe) or were succeeded in a non-male line (Nienhuis, Oldenhuis). The local elite in Oosterhesselen became smaller over time. The rising population caused the division of farms, a strong increase in smallholders and a drop in the number of substantial freeholders in the 18th century. Some of the farmers belonging to the local elite, as for instance the families Zwindermans and Coops, rented out pieces of land or even whole farms. So, the income of the local elite came partly from the rent of the ownership of land and was partly income from the output of their own farm.

Both in Groningen and Drenthe noblemen formed the top of the local elite, though lower in the social structure there were clear differences with freehold farming and land ownership being much more widespread and more important in Drenthe. Economic power in Oosterhesselen was concentrated in the hands of the freehold farmer elite. This was due to the Drenthe agricultural system based on commons, giving larger farmers more influence in economic and agricultural matters. Land rights and land use to a great extent determined social positions in rural Drenthe. The middle groups in society comprised of a small number of large tenants, followed by medium-sized farmers and only a few well-to-do artisans. Positioned somewhat lower were the smallholders, who often also performed a trade. The bottom of the social ladder consisted of a rather small group of landless labourers and poor people.

As in Groningen, the large farms in Drenthe could not exist without the hiring of non-family labour. However, the system of recruitment differed from that in Groningen, as the labour was not only supplied by labourers, but also during the harvest by smallholders supplementing their limited incomes. In this way a considerable part of the villagers depended on the local farmer elite.

In 1807, some 55 out of 94 farmers (59%) were tenant (DrA, OSA nr. 1513, 1623). Among those with larger farms this was even 13 out of 17 (76%). It turns out that the local elite had chosen to exploit the smaller farms themselves and to lease out their larger farms. Lambert Oldenbanning for example lived on a middle-sized farm, while he leased out two large farms. Tijmen Kymmel from Zwinderen (a descendant of the wealthy Tymen Oldenhuis of 1654) leased out several farms.

In the first half of the 19th century, the members of the old farmer elite like the families Zwindermans, Oldenbanning and Lanting still headed the list of tax payers. On the other hand, the composition of the elite had started to change. Among the highest taxpayers

families like Draaijers (miller) and Boetting (blacksmith) were found. Although a part of their income came from their farms, their main occupation was artisan (Gemeentearchief Oosterhesselen, HO 1815-1849).

Political power of farmer elites: Eastern Marne

Political power is above all determined by the access to and the actual participation in political institutions. In the 17th and 18th century the institutional development in the Groningen clay parishes was limited. Besides the judge and to some extent the water board, the most important local institution was the church. On a provincial level there was the sovereign rural diet. In the course of the 17th century, religious dissenters (mainly Roman-Catholics and Mennonites) were no longer allowed to hold official positions. For the Eastern Marne with its large minorities of Mennonites and Roman-Catholics this implied that a significant part of the economic elite was excluded from political power.

Locally, to some farms belonged the right to vote when a new reverend or school master was chosen, while a few farms held the right to yield the local judge or a representative in the water board every 10 to 50 years. However, most of these rights were previously alienated from the farms and by 1600 had been concentrated in the hands of the nobility. The inhabitants of the manor Verhildersum, and later of Borgweer acquired the near complete power in the parishes of Leens, Wehe and Zuurdijk. In Kloosterburen, a nobleman living in a neighbouring village controlled most rights, while in Warfhuizen many rights were in the hands of the local noblemen as well. This system resulted in only limited room for political influence of farmers on the local level.

The registration of legal acts, the mediation of civil conflicts and the judgement of criminal offences were the responsibility of the local judge. In the 16th and 17th centuries this important local position became professionalised and a few professional judges acted in the name of the noblemen as judges in numerous villages. Several judges were related to the rural farmer elite, as for instance Heine Pauwels, in 1626 a freeholder, but in later years acting as a judge. One of his sons became a small freehold farmer, going bankrupt in 1679. Two others became civil servant and reverend, respectively. In the 18th century the Cleveringa's occupied a similar position, descending from a tenant farmer in Leens who accumulated a lot of freehold land and held the position of church warden. The husband of the only daughter of this tenant farmer first became a member of the oligarchy ruling the small city of Appingedam, but later returned to Leens. Rapidly, the Cleveringa family rose to prominence in the Eastern Marne and several members were positioned high on the tax-lists, as they

increased their estates. They clearly escaped from the socio-cultural stratum of rich farmers. Descendants occupied positions as judge and water board director and married into the circle of reverends; one daughter married a solicitor active in the administration of the city of Groningen.

In the Dutch-Reformed church actual power was in the hands of the nobility. Since they were not able to perform all tasks, the church warden was often one of the rich farmers, acting on behalf of nobility. This position could be very influential as some of the churches (for instance Leens) controlled extensive properties. Often the reverend also had a say in matters concerning the church. Positions within the church (poor relief board) were not completely monopolised by the wealthiest inhabitants. Even men of ordinary means could become part of these boards.

A proper local government was missing in the early modern period. However, due to Dutch national political reforms municipalities were created around 1800 to make up for this. After 1811 a lasting system of municipalities consisting of several parishes came into being. A municipal council of 9 to 13 persons was chosen (and later on elected) from the wealthiest male inhabitants, often rich farmers. In the municipality of Kloosterburen a rich farmer became the first major. In Leens the medium-sized farmer Van Julsinga was appointed. He came from a family previously holding offices; a characteristic possibly more important than wealth. The majors were appointed by the king's provincial representative, who had a preference for prominent non-farmers, although these were hard to find in most Groningen municipalities.

In 1829 Van Julsinga was succeeded by the young squire Tjarda van Starkenborg Stachouwer. The new major took the side of the national government in a conflict with the rich liberal farmers and in the end he had to flee to the city (Botke 2002). Van Starkenborg Stachouwers' disastrous experience as a major will have been one of the reasons that he resigned in 1839 and left the region where his ancestors had lived and dominated since the 14th century, thus symbolising the decline of the local nobility and the rise of the non-noble farmer elite.

On a provincial level, sovereignty was since the end of the 16th century in the hands of the city of Groningen and the rural *Ommelanden*. In the rural diet males were allowed to vote if they owned at least a house and about 15 hectares of land, making it in theory an assembly of freehold farmers. If a parish did not send a freeholder, a representative of the local community was chosen. Officially there was no difference between noblemen and non-nobles, but in practise the diet was dominated by the nobility. They usually found enough

support under the freeholders and village representatives, both groups were as we have seen seldom independent. Noblemen were in this way able to acquire most of the attractive governmental positions, although in the executive board of deputies they only had two of the four positions, the other two went to non-noble rural patricians and a few extremely wealthy farmers (Feenstra 2007).

The rule that religious dissenters were excluded meant a severe restriction on the possible members of the diet coming from the Eastern Marne. Actually, six non-noble groups can be distinguished in the diet. First, a few farmers that owned a completely freehold farm; second, some large farmers owning just enough freehold land to reach the 15 hectare threshold; third, some men being created freeholders by nobles using fake sales of land; fourth, a few tenant-farmers owning land in other villages; fifth, some non-farmers owning land, usually judges like the Cleveringa's; sixth, elected representatives of parishes. The last group usually consisted of medium-sized or large tenant farmers who appeared in the diet for long periods. Clearly, although the diet in theory was meant to be an assembly of proper freehold farmers, in practise the non-noble members had highly diverging social backgrounds.

Numerous farmers participated in the diet for the six villages in the 17th and 18th century, but none of them played an influential role. The provincial policy was dominated by noblemen and a few prominent non-noble families. Presumably, most farmers from the Eastern Marne just appeared in the diet to support a local lord and this is not surprising since most of these farmers were at least in part tenants. Their position was vulnerable and also dependent on others, making it hard to follow an independent line. Even the rising fortune of farmers in the last decades of the 18th century did not change this, as the new rich were still mostly tenant farmers without a vote in the diet.

During the more democratic French period, possibilities for farmers of the Eastern Marne to participate in provincial politics increased. However, according to Botke (2002, p. 119-120), many wealthy farmers were not interested in politics. An exception was the rich and famous farmer Marten Aedsges from Zuurdijk, playing a role in provincial government after 1795. However, the real power remained in the hands of the noble elite and a non-noble sub-elite with close family-ties with (present and previous) urban patricians. After the establishment of the Netherlands as a central state and monarchy under king William I in 1813, the political position of the farmers even deteriorated. In the new provincial assembly, a third of the seats was reserved for noblemen, a third for urban citizens and a third for the inhabitants of the countryside. Even part of the urban and rural seats went to noblemen,

giving this shrinking group a disproportionate political influence, completely contradicting their loss of economic power. In the next decades this situation created a continuous discontent under the rich liberal farmers (Botke 2002, p. 348-354, 359) which only ended in 1848. The new constitution abolished all special rights for noblemen, and gave the rich farmers a much larger representation on the provincial level. As a result one farmer from the Eastern Marne even ended up in the Dutch national parliament in the second half of the 19th century.

Political power of farmer elites: Oosterhesselen

Locally, the *marke*-system played an essential role in Drenthe. In most villages an association existed that decided on the interest of the farmer community within a village, concerning the commons and other issues like the grazing of cattle on the fields after the harvest. Especially large land users and owners of large shares in the common possessions were influential. As the lands around the manor the Klencke constituted a completely separate *marke* in the parish of Oosterhesselen (Bos et al 1989), the local power of the richest freehold farmers was hardly limited by the presence of noble interests. The noble inhabitants of the Klencke forced this separation in 1635 to give themselves more freedom to decide on the fate of their own lands, but of course at the same time this also reduced their influence in the community.

Until the 19th century, Drenthe was not a proper province but a *landscape*, nevertheless, it was politically autonomous in regional affairs. The political elite in Drenthe consisted of noblemen and *eigenerfden* or freeholders. From 1603 onwards the term *eigenerfden* also received a specific political meaning. Just like the noblemen, the *eigenerfden* occupied a part of the seats in the regional government. In 1618 an *eigenerfde* had to own a certain amount of land (30 *mud*) or real estate worth 1,500 guilders. From 1672 onwards, also the possession of at least a quarter of a full share in a *marke* was necessary. All freeholders meeting these criteria could be chosen as representatives to the diet of the landscape, but in reality not all of them were politically active.

In the period 1644-1794, a total of 44 Oosterhesselen freeholders belonging tot 19 different families were 102 times chosen as representatives in the diet. Table 1 takes only male descendants into account, but if we include daughters in the family line then freeholders came mostly from the families Hilbrands/Nienhuis (26 times), Oldenhuis/Kymmel (9), Eissinge (9) and Oldenbanning (12). The first two families belonged to the non-noble governmental elite of Drenthe. The Oldenbannings and Eissings were more locally oriented.

During the 18th century, members of the prominent Oldenhuis/Kymmel family were

schulte in the parish of Oosterhesselen. In this influential position they were appointed by the stadtholder and after 1692 by the diet. They formed the bridge between local and regional government and were responsible for the persecution of minor criminal affairs. Important cases were handled by a regional court of justice in which the noblemen from the Klencke regularly held office. The local *schulte* was also responsible for civil affairs and tax collection in which he was supported by local freeholders. One example is the declaration of the hearth tax, which was not only signed by the s*chulte*, but also by two or more freeholders and a tax-collector. In these supportive positions the locally oriented Oldenbanning and Eissinge families were more active than the Hilbrands/Nienhuis family.

Table 1. Number of times a freeholder of the parish of Oosterhesselen was chosen as representative on the diet 1644-1794, based on Brood (1978)

Numbers of times chosen	Number of persons	Number of families
1	23	7
2	8	2
3	4	3
4	5	
6	2	2
8	-	1
9	1	2
10	1	
12		1
17		1
Total	44	19

There was a clear hierarchy in administrative and governmental functions. Generally functions within the local church, like elders and deacons, were less desired, whereas the office of *schulte* gave prestige and power. It is not without reason that the Oldenhuis/Kymmel family succeeded in keeping this function within their family. Most local farmers were not able to go beyond the local level; only a few inhabitants had sufficient ambition and power for this.

As in Groningen, the local political system changed in Drenthe after 1800. A council, two assessors and a major formed the administrative heart of the municipality, which included the whole parish of Oosterhesselen. As the Klencke had been a *marke* of its own, the noblemen had only mingled in local affairs to a limited extent in the 17th and 18th century. However, around 1800 several conflicts arose between the local farmers controlling the *marke* Oosterhesselen and the noblemen of the nearby Klencke (Gras 1997, p. 65-66) for

instance on the question who should pay for the maintenance of certain roads. The politically very active squire Derck van der Wijck from the Klencke clearly took more interest in local affairs than his ancestors and this was not appreciated by the powerful local farmers. In 1815, when Oosterhesselen became a separate municipality, he even managed to get his son appointed as major.

This active noble participation in local affairs, proved to be short lived, as the richer local farmers took over complete local power again after 1832 with the appointment of one of them, Jan Schoenmakers, as major. Until 1850, almost all members of the municipal council belonged to the local farmer elite. This large influence of rich farmers was the consequence of the Dutch voting system in which landownership and amount of taxes paid determined voting rights. It was not until the end of the 19th century that smallholders and labourers were able to enter the municipal councils.

On a provincial level the political power of the Oosterhesselen farmers diminished in the first half of the 19th century. Although the non-noble share in the new provincial assembly was with 20 out of 24 much larger than in Groningen, these positions were monopolized by members of a closed provincial elite of rich families with very distant ancestral roots in the group of Drenthe freeholders (Buning 1966). Tijmen Kymmel (1749-1826) of Zwinderen belonged to this non-noble oligarchy and also occupied a seat in the provincial assembly. His farmstead in Zwinderen, however, was later taken over by a daughter who earlier had eloped with someone of low social status. As a consequence, this branch of the family did not play a political role anymore. Due to the oligarchisation of the provincial government, other rich farmers in Oosterhesselen were not able to take over the provincial positions of Tijmen Kymmel. The political power of these farmers remained a solely local matter.

Continuity of local farmer elites in the Eastern Marne and Oosterhesselen

To keep the largest farms within the family was important for the continuity within the farmer elite. In the period 1740-1860, in the Eastern Marne 54% and in Oosterhesselen 61% of all farms was transferred to non-relatives (Paping/Karel 2011). The reasons to pass a farm to non-relatives varied: bankruptcy, moving to an often larger farm, absence of suitable heirs and so on. Large farms more often remained within the family. The preference for sons instead of daughters to succeed was much stronger in Oosterhesselen than in the Eastern Marne, and was also significantly stronger for larger farmsteads.

Table 2. Division of transfer of the use of very large farms in the Eastern Marne (over 50 hectare) and Oosterhesselen (over 19 hectare arable land), 1740-1860

	1740-1860	1742-1860
	Eastern Marne	Oosterhesselen
To relatives	49%	50%
To Remarrying widows	16%	2%
To Non-family	34%	45%
Unknown	-	3%
N	91	64

The figures of table 2 would suggest that continuity in the farmer elite was larger in Groningen than in Drenthe, however, in reality the opposite was the case. In Oosterhesselen especially, the numerous large tenant farms were easily passed to strangers, while the freehold farms remained within the family. It was also not unusual for the freehold farmer elite in Oosterhesselen to temporarily rent out their farmstead. Besides, in Oosterhesselen widows more often remained in charge of the farm without remarrying. Such strategies caused the ownership of a freehold farmstead in Oosterhesselen to be kept within the family, whereas in Groningen the user rights of the farm were more easily sold.

In the 16th century a rich and politically influential class of real freeholders still existed in the Eastern Marne, just as in the nearby Westerkwartier (Feenstra 2004). The last descendants of the freehold family Luersma in Leens married in the second half of the 16th century into the urban elite of Groningen and even Amsterdam. As a consequence the 17th century Amsterdam majors Bicker and De Graeff owned more than 100 hectare in the Marne. Around 1600 descendants from the freehold family Halsema of Kloosterburen were found in the urban elite of the city of Groningen (Haijkens). Comparable 16th century freehold families in Kloosterburen were the Bokema's and the Gokema's. In Zuurdijk, the Huis Ewer was in the 16th century inhabited by freeholders as Brungersma and Van Borck, being related to the lower nobility.

Around 1670 there were just a few remnants left of this flourishing freehold elite. Halsema's were still living on the Halsema farm, but the ownership was divided among family members and the male line had been interrupted. Geographical mobility and downward social mobility destroyed most of the original freehold class, to be replaced only partially by new families. The period 1550-1700 showed a continuing process of forced selling of pieces of freehold property. In Westerklooster (Kloosterburen), for example, the share of freehold land fell from 46% around 1600 to 4% around 1680, mostly because freeholders sold their land to noblemen.

In Groningen, farmers were not firmly attached to their native ground as a result of their strong market orientation. Equal inheritances were combined with the indivisibility of the farm holding and the wealthiest farmers tried to acquire a substantial farm for every child. As a consequence, family succession on farms was not the rule. The weak ties between farm and family also played a role in the high social mobility in the coastal countryside. In the 18th century Groningen countryside about half of the married males and females acquired a socio-economic position different from that of their parents (Paping 2010).

In Oosterhesselen, freehold families proved more successful in keeping the ownership of farms and land in the family. Continuity and discontinuity of large farms was often the result of marriages and the availability of successors. The farmland could be divided among the children, causing in Oosterhesselen, as elsewhere in the Dutch inland, a rise in smallholding. A more common practice, however, was that one child succeeded on the parental farm, after having paid off the siblings. If there was no possible successor the continuity was endangered. For example, the two daughters of Nienhuis married in the 17th century wealthy non-villagers and in the long run their farms were sold. On the other hand, at the end of the 18th century the nieces of freeholder Kiers inherited the farm. The husband of one of them took over the farm after her death. As long as there were male inheritors (Oldenbanning) there was no continuity problem, although some heirs had to wait until they turned 50 before they could marry and take over the farm, as for instance Leffert Goring in 1826. The inheritance system determined that property returned to the original branch of the family after a couple died childless. In this way land could accumulate within a family, which was the case by the family Lanting in Zwinderen. In the early 19th century the unmarried Geert Lanting administered several farms for his family, due to undivided inheritances. On most of these farms members of the family were in charge.

Table 3. Number of years a family (male descendants) belonged to the wealthiest group in Oosterhesselen 1654-1849

Category	Families (surnames)
0-50 years	32
50-100 years	3
100-150 years	7
150+ years	4
Total	46

The relatively low incidence of the succession of daughters in Oosterhesselen, makes it possible to investigate continuity of the local farmer elite by looking at the appearance of

surnames. Table 3 shows that there was a large group of 32 families who can be considered to have belonged to the local elite (defined as the about 20 richest households) for a relatively short period of less than fifty years. On the other hand there were 11 families which maintained their position for more than 100 years, or even 150 years. As these 11 families were present in nearly all periods studied, they actually comprised about half of the local farmer elite. As a consequence, it can be concluded that the long term continuity in the local farmer elite in direct male line was rather high, although a considerable part of the group of wealthiest families was renewed continuously.

In the Eastern Marne surnames were rarely used, and also the passing over of farmsteads to daughters was much more common, making it useless to study the continuity of the farmer elite in the same way. As an alternative approach we looked at family relations between the richest farmers around 1672, 1691, 1731, 1807 and 1837. This shows that despite the fact that there were family connections between the members of the local farmer elite at any moments, there was a very large turnover in the group of richest farmers and the continuity of the richest and politically most active farmers over two generations was rather low. There were only limited family-ties between the wealthiest in 1691 and those from 1770 onwards. However, it seems that with the increasing property rights for tenant farmers the continuity in the local farmer elite rose from 1770 onwards.

To reveal the continuity of the local farmer elite in the Eastern Marne we investigated in detail the ancestors of two extremely rich farmers in the first half of the 19th century. The Roman Catholic Renje Freerks Feddema was listed on two lists from 1813 with the highest tax-payers of the whole province of Groningen on position 25 and 28 respectively. At the moment of his second marriage in 1807, he and his new wife owned a net capital of 100,000 guilders, of which about 90% consisted of land (mostly user rights).

Feddema was a descendant of Rinje Tammes Halsema, a freehold farmer living in Kloosterburen around 1650. However, the rest of his ancestry is less impressive. He descended mainly from medium-sized farmers. The history of his direct male line illustrates perfectly the process of upward social mobility over several generations bringing Feddema to the top of the rural economic pyramid. The first known direct ancestor is an obscure Freerk Willems, living in Kloosterburen around 1690 who didn't use any land. Son Renje Freerks took over a small tenancy with 17 hectare. His oldest son Freerk Renjes married an old widow and in this way acquired a farm of 25 hectare along the dike, with considerable reclamation possibilities. Freerk remarried and after his death his widow and her new husband were number two on the list of richest Roman Catholics in 1809. The stepmother of

Renje Feddema was a labourer's daughter of humble origin.

The ancestors of Renje Feddema's wife Eetje Willems Boelens were considerably more successful. In a direct line she descended from freehold farmers in Oldenzijl (around 1550). The Boelens family married around 1580 into the large tenant farm Feddemahuis in Kloosterburen. Most of the members of this Roman-Catholic family remained quite rich, although their religious beliefs hampered their ability to gain any political power. Around 1700 the large Feddemahuis passed to another family, as the third wife of Willem Luurts (Boelens) remarried a Halsema. It was his greatgrandson Willem Reinders who with his marriage with Eetje in 1788 again brought the blood line of the family Boelens on the farm. The ancestry of Eetje, however, also tells stories of large upward social mobility. Her grandfather of mother's side started as a shoemaker around 1730, and only later became a tenant farmer. This part of her roots shows high geographical mobility with people moving from one side of the Groningen clay region to another as well.

We repeated this genealogical procedure for the richest farmer of the municipality of Leens around 1836 and his first wife. In contrast to Renje Feddema, Hindricus Warendorp Torringa belonged to the large Calvinist majority. He lived on his ancestral farm Stoepemaheerd in Zuurdijk (about 84 hectare) and his ancestry is more impressive than that of Feddema. In direct male line, all his ancestors occupied influential positions in the Eastern Marne, and Warendorp Torringa even descended from a 17th century freehold family. For another part he was tied to the provincial intellectual sub-elite of reverends with connections to a church warden and an urban brewer. His ancestors counted also members of the farmer family Borgman, active in the diet. Another branch of this Borgman family would later yield the first major of Kloosterburen.

The ancestry of the wife of Henricus Warendorp Torringa was comparable. Kunna van Kammen also descended from the same freehold farmer, making her a distant relative of her husband. She was a descendant of a major of the city of Appingedam and of a reverend. Her great-grandfather Hindrik Hindriks was a representative in the diet for Zuurdijk, however, being of German origin, he was also an example of a social climber, who under the protection of a nobleman became rich.

In conclusion, we do not want to argue that the most wealthy and politically influential farmers in the Eastern Marne of the period 1750-1850 were not related to the 16th century freeholders in the same region, since it can be shown that a lot of them were. However, the lines of continuity were thin, and often they went through female lines or via downward and then again upward social mobility.

Conclusions

Both in Oosterhesselen in the less market-oriented inland part, as in the Eastern Marne in the commercial coastal part of the Netherlands, a local elite of rich farmers existed, which came just behind the noblemen. In the Eastern Marne where freehold farming had nearly disappeared, this elite largely consisted of tenant farmers owning some pieces of land, while in Oosterhesselen it consisted of proper freeholders owning all the land they were cultivating. Although the farmers in the Eastern Marne were usually richer, they had less political power than the Oosterhesselen freeholders, both locally and provincially, as they were as tenants partly depending on local noblemen monopolizing most of the political rights. In Oosterhesselen, the freeholders dominated the local association supervising the extensive commons and in this way constituted the main local political power.

Due to changes in the system of renting out land, the economic position of the Eastern Marne farmers became less vulnerable at the end of the 18th century and they got extremely rich. As a consequence, their local political power position improved in the first half of the 19th century, a trend strengthened by national institutional changes (the introduction of municipalities). However, it was only after 1848 that this economic power was also reflected in influence on the provincial level. Changes in power relations in Oosterhesselen were much more limited, as the local farmer elite remained in power in the first half of the 19th century, only using a different institution (the municipality).

Interestingly, both in early modern Drenthe and Groningen villages there are traces of the existence of a non-local and non-noble political and economic elite with distant roots in the farmer elite (Oldenhuis/Kymmel and Cleveringa). This small group acted as an intermediate between noblemen and rich local farmers. They held important local offices and were more inclined to mix with the few intellectuals around like reverends than with rich farmers.

Finally, it can be concluded that continuity and family connections within the local farmer elites should not be overestimated. In Drenthe new families entered the group of wealthiest farmers continuously. Notwithstanding this, at least half the members of the local farmer elite belonged to the (economic) top for at least three generations. It was the persistence in family ownership of freehold farms which contributed to this continuity. In the Eastern Marne the turnover within the local group of wealthy farmers was higher, certainly in the direct male line. Only limited family-ties existed between the wealthiest in 1691 and those from 1770 onwards. The economic positions of rich farmers were less stable, because

of the partial dependence on tenancies, and due to the greater importance of the market with its risks. A large farm and a wealthy family was no guarantee for a sustained position within the elite over the generations in the Dutch commercial coastal region.

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